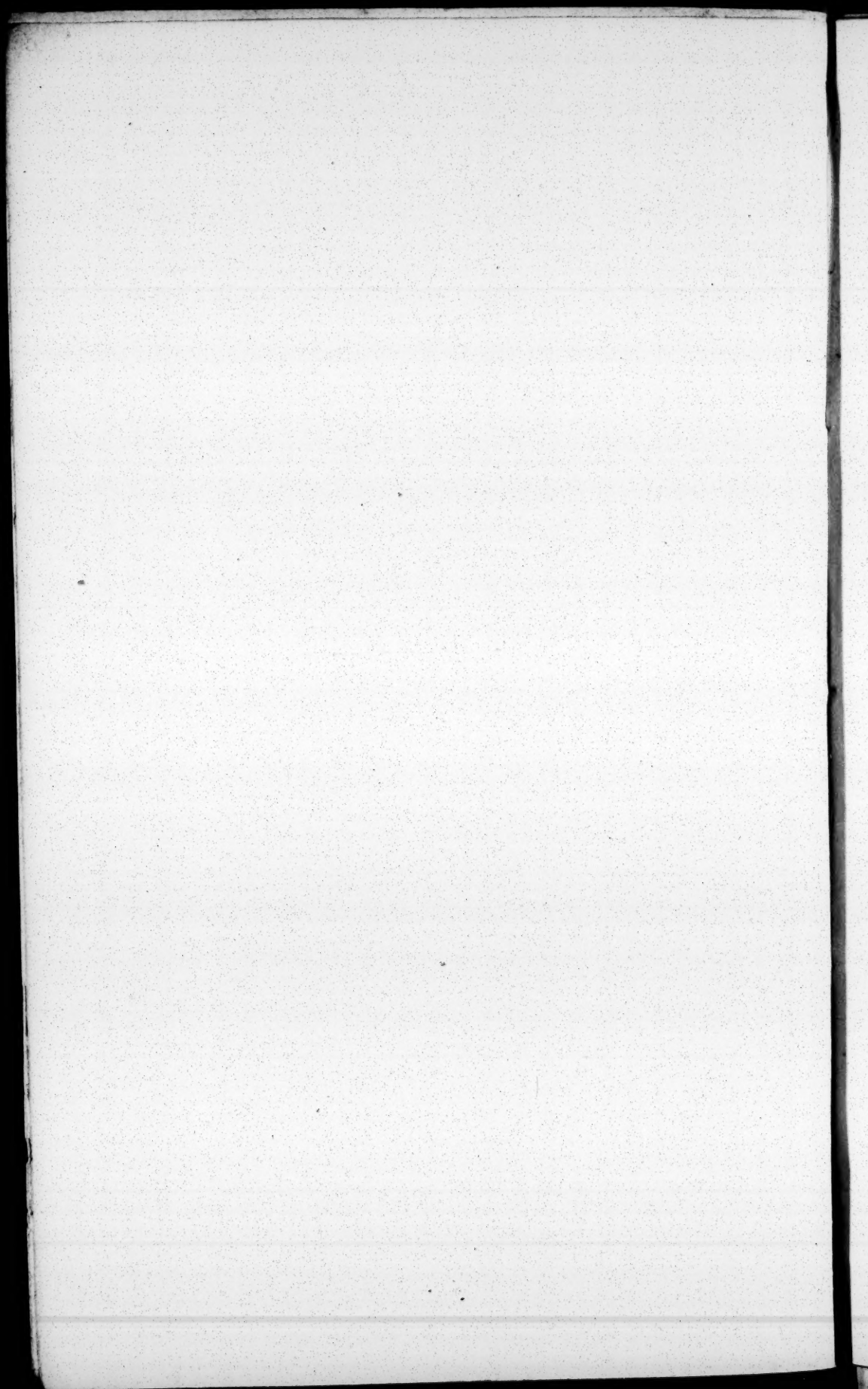


A
S E R M O N,

PREACHED AT

PRITTLEWELL, in the County of ESSEX.



A
S E R M O N,

PREACHED AT

PRITTLEWELL, in the County of ESSEX,

On the 18th of SEPTEMBER, 1791.

SOON AFTER THE

RIOTS at BIRMINGHAM,

AND THE

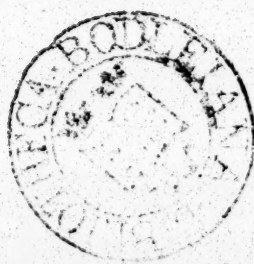
SELF-MURDER

OF

MR. SUTHERLAND.

By HERBERT CROFT, L. L. B.
VICAR OF PRITTLEWELL.

1791.



ECCLESIASTES vii. 10.

SAY NOT THOU, WHAT IS THE CAUSE
THAT THE FORMER DAYS WERE BET-
TER THAN THESE? FOR THOU DOST
NOT ENQUIRE WISELY CONCERNING THIS.

THE words of the text contain one of those great and leading rules of wisdom, which we all acknowledge, but against which we all of us too often sin.

In proportion as we conform to this rule, we may hope to have our rewards from God, in another world, for submitting patiently to his dispensations in this: and while we remain in this world of trial and probation, we shall have our rewards, by not longing after other times, or other situations than those in which God hath thought it proper to place us; and by cheerfully and contentedly doing our different duties in that state of life, unto which it hath pleased God to call us.

Contentment indisputably confers the greatest happiness which any of us can know on this side heaven. Who is there so little acquainted with the world, as to deny this? It is the first lesson which we learnt from our parents; it is the first which we teach our children: and, yet, how many of us are continually saying, and perhaps, in the hearing of our children—What is the cause that the former days were better than these?

It is too probable that we heard those, who went before us in the peevish paths of this world, utter the same lamentations; at the same time that they preached up to us religion and contentment. But with what confidence can we take up these dissatisfied murmurings of the unrighteous?

How can we have the presumption to set up ourselves as judges, as supreme judges, of the goodness of these days, or of former days? or of any days?

How dare we dictate to the God who made us, and who placed us here?

From God our maker and our heavenly father, the former and the latter days proceed: God suith his days to his creatures and his creatures to his days, with at least as much tenderness, as, according to Isaiah (xl. 11.), he gathereth the lambs with his arm, and carrieth them
in

in his bosom, and gently leadeth those that are with young : and it little becometh the righteous to lament that the former days were better than these, since, to the righteous, all days and all times and all seasons cannot be otherwise than good.

The righteous, or even those who are only in the habits of approaching their creator, morning and evening, with that beautiful and comprehensive petition of their redeemer's which is called the Lord's Prayer—with what face can they make the words of my text the subject of their thoughts, much less of their conversations or complaints, if they have indeed recited, with their hearts as well as their lips, “Our Father which art in heaven, thy will be done in earth as it is in heaven?”

With what face can they dare to set up their blind wills against the all-seeing will of the all-wise and all-mighty God, if they subscribe, as we are surely all bound to subscribe, to the exemplary words of the son of God, in the most exquisite of mortal agonies, “Nevertheless, not my will, but thine be done?”

The times, in which we feel least willing to subscribe to these words of our amazing favour, are when it pleaseth God to direct matters, in this world of his, somewhat contrary to what our

mighty wisdom chooseth to suppose would be for the best.

Doth God, for reasons known to his wisdom and goodness, shut up the heavens (Deut. xi. 17.), and command the clouds that they rain no rain on the land (Isaiah v. 6.) ?

Immediately the inhabitants of certain parts of God's earth forget that their little spots are not all the world, and exclaim—What is the cause that the former days were better than these ?

But assuredly they do not enquire wisely concerning this.

Doth God, for reasons equally wise and good, break up the fountains of the great deep and open all the windows of heaven (Genesis vii. 11.), and rain an overflowing rain upon the earth (Ezek. xxxviii. 22.) ?

Immediately those who have their dwellings in other parts of God's world, become wiser than their maker and start up able to instruct their God : they forget that there is more world behind their petty hill : and they too with insolence demand—What is the cause that the former days were better than these ?

But, of a truth, they also enquire very foolishly concerning this.

Hardly can any number of persons, of the same parish,

parish, be gathered together, without being of almost as many different opinions about the weather which is best for God's creatures, and for God's world, and dictating accordingly to their God.

Unwise, ungrateful and wicked murmurers ! God is not only the author of the rain and the heat, but of all nature at large. Our Lord is the God both of the vallies and of the mountains. The Lord careth for all his creatures ; or, in the affecting language of the holy psalmist (cxlv. 9.), the Lord is good to all, and his tender mercies are over all his works.

Yes, even at the wettest, or the driest season, our God is the same God as formerly ; we have the same father in heaven as before : a father, a God, who looketh to the ends of the earth, and seeth under the whole heaven ; who weigheth the waters (Job xxviii. 24.), and measureth them in the hollow of his hand (Isaiah xl. 12.) ; who maketh his decree for the rain (Job xxviii. 26.).

Let not us presume to tell an omnipotent power like this that the former days were better than these, and that he hath sent too much or too little rain on his earth, on *his* earth ; when, with the omnipotent maker of the rain, and of the sun and of the universe and of time and of eternity, all the nations of the earth are counted as the small

dust of the balance, as a drop of a bucket?
(Isaiah xl. 15.)

Let us not, if we would be grateful towards God, if we would be only wise towards ourselves, presume even to whisper, no not so much as to think, that the present days are not as good as they might be. Alas, the worst days are perhaps far better than the best of us deserve; and God not only numbers the innumerable drops of rain, but the hairs of our heads, and still more exactly the murmurs of our lips. His ears are alive to our most silent whispers; and if our thoughts do but complain of God, he assuredly overheareth them.

Let us, if we fancy ourselves injured by a shower too much or too little, compare our miseries with those of our neighbours; and let us thank God that it is no worse with us, instead of murmuring against God, and asking—What is the cause that the former days were better than these?

At the present season, I trust that we of this part of God's earth are not guilty of murmuring and complaining; after it hath pleased God to bless us with such a plentiful and joyful harvest: and I hope that I shall meet many of you, in this place, on the Lord's-day after the next—many of you; high and low, rich and poor—in return for this
and

and the other blessings we have all received from God, to join in the celebration of the holy communion and the most COMFORTABLE sacrament of the body and blood of Christ.

But the words of the text apply to us, it will be found, in more respects than our wicked and selfish dissatisfactions about the weather.

Many of you, who hear me, spend your time in other ways than in reading books, but you may rely on those who have time to read, and you may believe an assertion which is strictly true, that in *all* times have been given to the public books which have declared that the former days were better than these, and that the present days, whether as to politicks or morals, are worse than *all* other times, and the worst which a wicked world hath ever seen. But, as it is not possible that *all* days, or *all* times, or *all* seasons can be the *worst*, it necessarily follows that such alarming books do not enquire wisely concerning this. These times may be bad, or the present season may be hot or cold, wet or dry ; but, to be able to assert, and blasphemously to call God to witness, that these times are the worst, or that the present season is the driest or the wettest, the coldest or the hottest, which the world has *ever* seen, we ought to have before us, at the moment of comparison,

all seasons and *all* times ; we should possess the mind of him who made us, to whom past, present and future are the same.

Those among you who do read—be carefully upon your guard against every book of the present day, which openly declares or secretly insinuates that the former days were better than these.

Still more, if possible, let those who do not read, and whose understandings are, therefore, perhaps, more open to imposition, take care how, in any place where two or three are gathered together, they suffer their unsuspecting simplicity to be imposed on, and led astray, by such false assertions.

Nothing is more certain—it is not more certain that the righteous will be rewarded and the wicked punished—than that every mob, every riot, every rebellion, which this or any country hath ever seen, and which hath ended the most wretchedly for those concerned, began first with a cry that the former days were better than these. May the God of heaven forbid, the Lord of peace, whose son came to give peace on the earth, that such a cry should ever disturb the tranquillity of this parish.

This cry went forth, lately, on the other side
of

of the kingdom, and caused wicked and cruel riots, for which some of our poor deluded fellow-creatures have lately suffered; who were convinced enough, before they gave up their forfeited lives to the law, that they had not enquired wisely concerning this. Be assured, that every one, who begins this cry, and little less, every one who listens to it, is an enemy not only to all peace, order and good government, but to all times and to all days, to all individuals and to all parishes and places; and has no desire but to raise a storm, in the hope of enriching himself by plundering such of his fellow-creatures as may be wrecked and cast away.

Almost eighteen hundred years make no difference in the history of the human mind with regard to this. When you go to your homes, look at the 19th chapter of the Acts of the Apostles. Read the curious account of the stir and uproar at Ephesus. Demetrius the silversmith and his workmen, who began the riot, did not enquire whether Diana of the Ephesians or the living God deserved to be worshipped, but whether the worship of the living God would not cause fewer silver shrines to be wrought for Diana, and fewer Gods to be made with hands. Therefore it was that they found the former times were better than
their

lay
 their own. Sirs, said Demetrius, when he began the harangue, which spirited them up to fill the whole city with confusion—"Sirs, ye know " that by this craft we have our wealth." Even so are too many Demetriuses of the present day ready to cast firebrands and death, if the craft by which they have their wealth, whether lawfully or unfully, seem at all to be in danger. But the 32d verse of this 19th chapter of Acts, should, be perused, again and again, in such times as the present; and should be stored up in our memories against any attempt to persuade us that the former times were better than these, or that these times (supposing them to be bad) can be improved by confusion and anarchy, by riots and mobs: it is a description, which however severe, all men, in proportion as they are wise only with regard to this world, must acknowledge to be strictly just. In this riot at Ephesus, as it hath happened in every riot since, and will happen in every riot to come, the holy historian saith that *some cried one thing and some another: for the assembly was confused,* AND THE MORE PART KNEW NOT WHEREFORE THEY WERE COME TOGETHER. Yet they undoubtedly all agreed in asking—what is the cause that the former days were better than these.

This

This was the cry among our fellow-creatures in an adjoining kingdom, separated from us by the neighbouring sea ; and, alas ! how many of them, without a vine or a fig-tree, under which they can rest their heads, are now ready enough to confess that they did not enquire wisely concerning this !

Let us bless God, under our vines and under our fig-trees, for the happiness of our government ; which other governments who are now giving most into change, change only to imitate ! and let us pray to God that he will be pleased to give us grace to know when we are happy, and to refuse to listen to those, who do not wish to benefit us, but themselves, when they endeavour to persuade us that the former days were better than these.

Nor is this a text which applieth to us only as we live under a government, and as we wish to live happily, and to enjoy what we possess—it applieth to us in almost every capacity and every situation, it applieth to us no less generally than advice to rest satisfied with our condition, than another text which recommendeth to us in whatsoever state we are therewith to be content. (Phil. iv. 11.)

No one person can lay any claim to the praise
of

of practising contentment, any claim to the blessings which contentment brings, who permits himself to say or even to think that the former days were better than these. In addition to the great and obvious folly of such conduct, and its great and obvious wickedness, another wickedness and folly is this. While we are saying so, our heavenly governor; our father, which is in heaven, God, whose tender mercies are over all his works, hath chosen perhaps this very moment of our blasphemous dissatisfaction and discontent to lay his inscrutable schemes for our future happiness, and to prove to us, by arguments, which as they make us happy must necessarily make us confess their truth, that the former days were not better than these.

Let me illustrate what I mean. When at the beginning of the present troubles in a neighbouring kingdom, the cruel state prison was destroyed; one of the wretches who was set at liberty, was released it is said from an unmerited confinement of seven and twenty long years. Now, suppose that, at the moment which saw the Bastile for ever laid in ruins, this prisoner had given up all hope, after twenty-seven years (and who among us would not?)—that he had complained to God that the former days were better than these; and
that

that he had prepared, as Job was wickedly advised, to curse God and die.

Behold, while with the greatest folly, as well as wickedness, he grasps the instrument of self-murder in his frantick hand—behold, while he prepares to throw back his life in the face of his creator, because he is convinced that his miseries never can, by any possibility, end—his miseries are at an end, his prison doors fly open, his fetters are unlocked, and he once more beholds the light of day and is an inhabitant of the world, after having lingered out almost the life of a man in a hopeless and inhuman dungeon.

Even so is it possible that some sudden and unexpected comfort may shine forth on every one who fancieth himself, in the fullest sense of the words what our blessed Saviour submitted to be for our sakes, “despised and rejected of men, a “man of sorrows and acquainted with grief” (Isaiah liii. 3.).

Let that desponding wretch, who persuades himself his heart is breaking, hold his desperate hand: let him wait, if it be only a little, to see what a paternal God, and a crucified Redeemer may cause to come to pass: let him consider much and long and often, before he do that, which
can

can be done but once, and which can never be undone.

Supposing it to be true, as he has falsely persuaded himself, that matters are now come to the extremity, that they are really at the worst ; even if this were true, what follows ?

That every change must, now, necessarily be for the better ; that every step, from the worst of all, must be towards the best : and, at the most extreme point of all, neither happiness nor misery can stand.

Though it may have pleased God, for his present sins or his future good, to make him so acquainted with grief, that in the strong language of Jeremiah (Lam. iii. 17.), he hath *forgotten prosperity* (it hath totally gone out of his mind what manner of thing prosperity is ; that there is any such thing as prosperity : so many years have passed away since he beheld it)—Yet still upon this wretch comfort may unexpectedly shine forth ; upon this hopeless being, in spite of his manifold sins, the Lord may deign to lift up the light of his countenance.

Even so it is possible that comfort and happiness might have shone forth, and very shortly, on that rash and hasty man, who so lately committed
 ted

ted publick and deliberate murder upon himself, in the presence of so many of his fellow-creatures and of his King.

True it is, strictly true, as the wise man saith (Prov. xiii. 12.), that hope deferred maketh the heart sick. But will even sickness of the heart and soul justify self-murder?

Could this unhappy man have borne this sickness a few days or only a few hours longer (which a good man ought to bear for any length of time), it is possible that he too might have seen an end to his miseries (which he had not borne for seven and twenty years), without putting a cowardly end to his life: and that he might, now, be comforting his orphan children, in the midst of happiness, instead of adding another to the sad and dangerous list of cowards, who fly from misery; and run away from trouble, unto which both his bible and his experience should have taught him that every man is born, as the sparks fly upwards (Job v. 7.).

But, alas, he too had persuaded himself that the former days were better than these; and had brought his mind to believe that the whole world did not contain so complete a wretch; and that, therefore, he had a right to put himself out of the world, to desert all the ~~difficult~~ purposes

for

different

for which he was created, and to rush into the presence of his God. Well it is for him that his creator and his God is also his *father* which is in heaven; but with all that heavenly father's kindness, how bitterly may he be made to know that he did not enquire wisely concerning this !

Never, never may any one of us be made to know and confess this by an offended God ! Never may any of us persuade ourselves, in any respect, that the former days were better than these. To prevent this in one respect, let us look at other nations, who are just now changing their government, and from the miseries which they have brought upon themselves, let us learn to enjoy and be contented with our own happiness. That we may not, in another respect persuade our dissatisfied selves into a false opinion of the wretchedness of the present day, let us look *below* us in the world, and not *above* us—let us compare our situations with those below us in the scale of God's creatures and not with those above us ; with those who are more unhappy, and not with those who are more happy ; and, whatever may be the evil of the present day, let us confess, which no one will deny, that even this evil might still be worse. The grief of Job, as his sacred history *is* faith,

faith, was very great ; but even *his* ~~guilt~~ might *grief*
have been greater.

May no one in this congregation ever experience the griefs of Job, nor any griefs but what we can bear ; and with whatever griefs it shall please our father which is in heaven to afflict us, may we never demand, with my text, what is the cause that the former days were better than these ? but may we only say with holy Job—shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil ?

T H E E N D.

